

Comparison of the Efficiency of Self-awareness, Stress Management, Effective Communication Life Skill Trainings on the Social and Academic Adjustment of First-year Students

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to compare the effectiveness of self-awareness, life skills training, stress management, and effective communication, on the social and academic adjustment of first-year university students. To achieve study aim, a quasi-experimental method was used. In total, 100 first-year male and female students of Urmia's Islamic Azad University were chosen and randomly placed into four groups, each of which included 25 persons; Three of the groups were experiment groups, and the received training in one of these areas, self-awareness skills, stress management or effective communication while the fourth group served as the control group and received no intervention. Training content packages were sourced from the Publications Office and Cultural Affairs of State Welfare Organization and compiled from materials on student life skills training, and injury prevention. Training sessions were conducted through workshops and used active learning techniques such as; brainstorming, role playing and group activities. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was used for pre-test and post-tests. Independent sample T-tests and ANCOVA were used to analyze the data. The results showed that life skills training had an overall positive effect on the social and academic adjustment of the students in the experimental groups ($P < 0.01/0$). In determining the efficacy of each of the skills on social adjustment, it was found that the self-awareness skills variable had a greater affect than the other skills. Stress management skills and effective communication were the next effective, respectively. Efficacy was similar in each of the three skills for academic adjustment, and there was no significant difference between them.

Keywords: *life skills, self-awareness, stress management, effective Communication, social adjustment, academic adjustment, student*

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1. Introduction

The first year of university is both a major social event, as well as a source of psychological stress for students. Although entering university is a positive step in a person's life, it can still test an individual's coping resources and capabilities¹. At the beginning of university everyone encounters new academic, personal and social requirements that differ from their previous roles and responsibilities; therefore, different methods and strategies are needed in order to adjust and can affect a person's health and ability to cope (Tinto, 1996, Parker et al., 2004, & Credé et al, 2012).

During their course, students will experience different social challenges (eg, separation from family) and intellectual demands (necessary for successful academic outcomes) that may be associated with emotional distress, such as;

feelings of loneliness, sadness, nostalgia, grief, and increased drug use (Lubkar and Etzel, 2007). The results of previous studies have indicated that most of the probations and dropouts are related to first-year students (Boulter, 2002). In this regard, the findings of a study on English freshman students showed that during the first year, the students' psychological problems rose significantly, from 25% to 52 % (Moffat et al., 2004). In addition, the use of psychotropic substances and alcohol may also increase at this point and that may result in conflict with the law (Wechsler and Nelson, 2008; Labry et al., 2012).

Almost all freshmen entering university experience an adjustment period that depends on their social development and available skills, and this may differ in terms of the time and speed of change (Dyson and Rank, 2006). Hence, the most important and most common problems of students in this course are adjustment problems. The first six weeks is the critical period of

adaptation to a new environment and to solve conflicts and problems (Chong Abdullah et al., 2010).

Since adjustment occurs in different domains, related problems can arise in many different areas as well. The most important problems found in the students in this course are social and academic adjustments. Academic adjustment means the student's perception of the quality of their academic performance, the satisfaction experienced from doing homework and practices, as well as satisfaction with their scores and quality of teaching, are related to adjustment (Lefkowitz, 2003). Furthermore, academic adjustment is a set of reactions by which a person prepares his or her construct for a harmonious response to the conditions of the academic environment, and for the activities that the environment requires. Consequently, anything that fails to be responsive to the new environment will provide a basis for incompatibility (Michaeli Manee, 2010).

Social adaptation means the continuous interaction and exchange between the individual and the environment, combined with successful implementation of social roles (Stoff, 1997). Social adjustment can be considered to be a harmony between the individual's goals and aspirations, with the community's needs and purposes. Moreover, such a person acts in a way that his personal goals are achievable and they also conform to the requirements and norms of society in a socially acceptable way (Shrivastava, 2008). In a university environment, this form of adaptation depends on the perceptions and degree of the individual's contentment with their social life. Finding new friends, satisfaction with extracurricular activities and relationships govern a student's ability to respond to both their educational and personal needs (Baker and Siryk, 1986).

There are many factors that create problems for a new student's social and academic adjustment. For example, studies have shown that family separation, economic hardship, education apathy and lack of familiarity with the instruction and discipline of the university are considered to be major threats to the adjustment and mental health of this group (Levey et al., 1998 ; Sjoberg, 2008). An important point is that one group of students quickly adapt to the new environment and have few difficulties. In contrast, another group encounters difficulties from the time they enter and experiences academic decline, and compatibility problems, and experiences issues such as depression and anxiety (Sjoberg, 2008). For instance, some studies have shown that mature identity styles and parenting styles are important factors in adjustment to college (Hickman et al., 2000; Michaeli Manee, 2010).

The main reason for this can probably be found in individual differences. Some people have the abilities and skills that enable them to cope effectively with the stress of dealing with stimulation and environments which cause stress, while some groups lack these features (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000).

The most important skills and abilities mentioned above can be conceptualized as life skills and these have been taught in various programs. The term applies to a range of mental-social skills and interpersonal skills that can help people to make informed decisions, establish effective interpersonal communication, develop coping skills, and manage their own development and growth. The life skills training program included ten skills in five areas that can be summarized as self-awareness and empathy, coping

with emotions and stress, effective communication, social and interpersonal skills, creative and critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making (Emami-Naeen, 2007).

The results of different studies have demonstrated that these skills are effective in improving mental health (Williams and Williams, 1997; Sobhi Gharamaleki and Rajabi, 2010, Michaeli Manee et.al, 2011, Li et al, 2013), health and self-efficacy promotion (Taheri et al, 2013), self-esteem improvement (Khaledian et al, 2014), increasing social adjustment (Rahmati et al, 2010), developing social skills and individual resistance against peer-pressure for risky behavior (Campbell Tuttle et al., 2009), reducing the tendency to indulge in substance abuse (Smith, 2004), lowering high-risk sexual behaviors (Botrin and Griffin, 2004), improving academic performance at university and increasing adjustment levels (Yadav and Iqbal, 2010).

However, training people in these skills is a time consuming and costly process, while its implementation in all environments and educational situations is simply not feasible. In addition, some studies have shown that some skills are more effective and more efficient than others (Yedidi et al., 2003). Furthermore, separate training of skills can be effective in improving individuals' skills and health (Nemati and Sogolitappeh, 2007). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of three skills, which included; stress management, self-awareness and effective communication with others, as basic skills for successful adjustment (Kirby et al., 2006), on first-year students' social and academic development. This study provides valuable information about the impact of separate life skills, for planners, designers and implementers of these programs.

2. Methodology

The present study's method was a quasi-experimental design of pre-test and post-test with a control group. The population of this study consisted of first-year undergraduate students of the Islamic Azad University of Urmia, and 100 first-year students from several majors were selected as a sample using a multistage sampling method.

Thus, based on a percentage of the total population of each community college, the proportion of students in the sample was determined. Then the proportion for each major, sex and grade, and their share in the sample were determined. Participants in the intervention groups were assigned and matched into groups according to their age, education and sex distribution.

After selection and placement of all groups, participants completed tests about adjustment with a student adjustment with college Questionnaire (SACQ) which, consisted of two components; social and academic adjustment. The experimental groups received the treatment described below. At the end of the last training session, all groups completed the test (SACQ) as the post-test. Data were statistically analyzed using dependent group's t-test and covariance test.

2.1. Measures

- Students Adjustment with College Questionnaire (SACQ)

This self-reporting tool was designed by Baker and Siryk and consisted of 67 items (Baker and Siryk, 1989).

The (SACQ) is largely used in the United States, European countries, Japan and China, and it has four subscales: academic compatibility (24 questions), social adjustment (20 questions), personal-emotional consistency (15 questions), and attachment to the institution/university (8 questions). The test questions are scored on a 5 point Likert scale from, ‘totally is true about me, to ‘not at all true about me’. In this study, both academic and social adjustment subscales were used. This instrument has been studied in numerous studies from a psychometric properties point of view. In Baker and Siryk’s study, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for all sub-components and the total score were above 80%. Lanthier and Windham³⁶ in their study calculated the internal consistency coefficients for the components to be between 86% and 95%. In a study conducted by Michaeli Manee (2010) in Iran, an academic adjustment subscale coefficient of 0/84, and a social score of 0/72 was reported.

2.2. Experimental Treatment

The training content packages were compiled from materials from the Publications Office of Student Life Skills Training, Injury Prevention Community and Cultural Affairs of State Welfare Organization. Three skills of self-awareness, stress management and effective

communication, were taught in seven sessions of 1 hour and 30 minutes to each experimental group. The methods of teaching life skills included active learning techniques such as; brain storming, role playing and group discussions. Educational concepts of self-awareness skills consisted of self-awareness components, including physical consciousness, emotional self-awareness, knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, thoughts, feelings, goals and values. Students with access to this training learn by achieving self-knowledge, and use their strengths and abilities in order to improve their weaknesses, which results in take better use of their capabilities.

Contents and concepts taught in effective communication skills included; definition of communication, talk about different communication styles (authoritarian style, aggressive style and daring style), talking and listening skills, and assertiveness skills, that were taught to students through active techniques. The subjects were trained in educational concepts on stress management, issues such as stress definition, the effects of stress on the health, psychological and social impact on individuals, coping with stress strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused and maladaptive), and using problem-solving methods.

Training protocol sessions are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Training Protocol

session	Self-awareness Instruction	Stress Management	Effective Relation
First	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement of pre-test of relations • Introduction of training goals • Definition and explanation of self • Definition of self awareness • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement pre-test of relations • Introduction of training goals • Define and describe stress, symptoms and responses • Relaxation instructions • Relaxation exercises • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement pre-test of relation • Introduction of training goals • Definition of relations and types • Wrap-up session
Second	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Training in the use of check list of abilities and interests • Training the use of check list of weaknesses and disinterests • Comparison of the check lists • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the last session • Discuss internal and external factors of stress • Beliefs and recognitions relationship with stress feeling • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Discuss different ways of relations • Verbal relations • Non-verbal relations • Body language • Wrap-up session
Third	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Determining short, middle and long-term goals • Comparisons of the goals with abilities, interests, disinterests and weaknesses • Wrap-up of the mentioned instances' concordance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Recognition alterations and its effect on stress • Group talking about stimulating and inhibiting effects on stresses • Talking about stress' effects on body and soul • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Obstacles of effective relations • Training of speaking skills • Training of listening skills • Wrap-up session
Fourth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Estimation and comparison of successes and failures • Comparison of successes and failures with abilities and strengths lists • Looking again at lists and rewriting them • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Introducing ways of confronting stresses • Adaptive and non-adaptive ways of confronting stresses • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Exercises of talking skills on problem situations • Practice listening skills • Effective use of body language • Wrap-up session
Fifth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Definition and explanation of feelings and emotions, their role and usage in life • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Training of stress management • Breathing practice and deviation of thoughts • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Talking about interpersonal conflicts and their reasons • Management and solving of interpersonal conflicts • Necessity of agreement and to be positive • Wrap-up session
Sixth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • The use of self-evaluation to identify feelings and emotions in different situations • Management of feelings and emotions • Compliance of feelings and emotions list with goals and abilities list • Wrap-up session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Training in problem solving • Practicing problem situations and problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Assertiveness training • Practice saying no • Training partnership • Wrap-up session
Seventh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the last session • Rewrite the list and their match with each other • Wrap-up and review of sessions • Implement post-test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the whole sessions • Implement post-test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice assertiveness • Review all of the sessions • Implement post-test

In this section the results of pre-test and post-test T scores of social and academic adjustment variables in the experimental and control groups are presented.

3. Results

Table 2. Mean an T -test results showed significant difference between the pre-test and post-test for dependent variables

Produced instruction	factor	group	Pre-test average	Post-test average	Average of post-test pre-test's differenc	df	T	Sig.
Effective relation training	social adjustment	experimental	66.46	68.60	1.96	48	3.5	0.001**
		control	66.68	62.88	-3.08	48		
	Academic adjustment	experimental	72.20	73.36	1.16	48	2.73	0.009**
		control	66.67	66.48	-0.20	48		
stress Management training	social adjustment	experimental	68.76	70.75	1.99	48	3.5	0.001**
		control	68.66	66.60	-0.49	48		
	Academic adjustment	experimental	62.28	66.96	2.76	48	4.42	0.000***
		control	66.68	65.55	1.13	48		
Self-awareness training	social adjustment	experimental	65.68	72.69	4.04	48	14.07	0.000***
		control	67.08	66.84	-0.92	48		
	Academic adjustment	experimental	66/60	68.78	2.12	48	3.76	0.000***
		control	66.66	65.46	1.2	48		

T differences between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups in all three trainings on social and academic adjustment are significant at the $p < 0/01$ level, and in all of the components the experimental group had the best response. In other words it can be stated that the experimental treatments improved social and academic adjustment and these trainings were an effective method in the promotion

of adaptation. Investigations of differences revealed that the largest increase belonged to social adjustment in the self education group. This means that self-awareness training could create the greatest change in this variable's scores.

To compare the effectiveness of experimental treatments on the social adjustment variable, covariance analyzing was used to test the results and these are presented below:

Table 3. Covariance analyze of social adjustment variable

	Total squares	df	average of squares	F	Sig.	Eta Square
Fixed quantity	75.07	1	75.07	24/92	**0.000	0.24
Pre-test	784.73	1	784.73	3073/03	**0.000	0.97
Group	123.05	3	41.02	16/08	**0.000	0.34
Error	242.39	95	2.55			
Total	8553.96	99				

** $P < 0.01$.

The results show that the acquired F value of groups was significant at the level of $P < 0/01$. Therefore, we can conclude that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups. In other words, training in self-awareness life skills, effective communication and stress management, created measureable improvements in the social adjustment component. The results obtained showed a significant difference between the correlated means of the experimental and control groups, with a value of $F = 16/08$,

degree of freedom 3, and confidence level of $0/99$. Eta squared indicated that 34% of the variation in the covariate pre-test and post-test scores can be explained by changing group membership (control or experimental). In other words, the social adjustment post-test scores compared to pre-test scores were due to attendance at life skills training sessions.

To determine which of the skills training was the most effective, a post LSD test was used and a comparison of the findings are presented in the table below:

Table 4. Multiple LSD comparison of social adjustment component

Group I	Group J	average differences (I-J)	standard deviation	Sig.
Self-awareness	effective relation	2.31	0.45	**0.000
	Stress management	1.27	0.45	**0.006
	control	2.92	0.45	** 0.000
Effective relation	Stress management	-1.41	0.45	*0.02
	control	0.61	0.45	0.18
Stress management	control	1.65	0.45	**0.000

* $P < 0.05$

** $P < 0.01$.

The results of the comparison between the two averages indicated significant differences between the two methods of effective communication and self-awareness, demonstrating that training in self-awareness skills was more effective in increasing and improving social adjustment. The difference between self-awareness education and stress management was significant too, and between these two skills, self-awareness was more

efficient. Comparison of the averages of effective communication establishment and stress management techniques was more efficient. An important finding was that there was no significant difference between the averages of effective communication training and the control group, and therefore this type of training was not shown to be efficient in improving social adjustment.

Table 5. Covariance analyze of academic adjustment variable

	Total squares	df	average of squares	F	Sig.	Eta Square
Fixed quantity	74.02	1	74.02	21.05	**0.000	0.24
Pre-test	9036.85	1	9036.85	2570.76	**0.000	0.97
Group	77.63	3	25.88	7.36	**0.000	0.34
Error	333.94	95				
Total	10294.44	99				

**P<0.01.

The results indicated that the F-score was $P < 0/01$, and therefore we can conclude that there was a significant difference between the averages of the experimental and control groups. In other words, employment of self-awareness, effective communication and stress management training improved the academic capability component. Based on the obtained results it can be stated that between the corrected average of experimental and control groups with $F=7/36$ and degree of freedom 3 with

confidence level of 99%, there was a significant difference. Eta squared suggests that 96% of the variation in the covariate pre-test and post-test scores resulted from changing group membership (control or experimental). As a result, the post-test's academic adjustment scores, compared with pre-test scores were due to attending sessions of life skills training. In order to determine which of the skills training was more effective, a comparison post-test LSD was used and the findings are listed below:

Table 6. Multiple LSD comparison of academic adjustment variable

Group I	Group J	average differences (I-J)	standard deviation	Sig.
Self-awareness	effective relation	0.69	0.54	0.21
	Stress management	0.44	0.54	0.41
	control	1.92	0.54	** 0.000
Effective relation	Stress management	-0.68	0.54	0.22
	control	1.24	0.54	*0.02
Stress management	control	2.35	0.54	**0.000

**P<0/01

*p<0/05.

Results of the comparisons of the means showed that the difference was not significant between the two methods of effective communication establishment and self-awareness, and no one method had superiority over another however, the difference between these training's average and control groups were significant.

Thus, we can conclude that participation in these training sessions was effective in improving academic adjustment, although none of the tutorials were significantly different from each other.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of life skills' training in self-awareness, stress management and effective communication on students' social and academic adjustment. The results indicated that self-awareness, effective communication and stress management skills in total, resulted in increased social and academic adjustment, and furthermore, there was a significant difference in student's pre-test and post-test scores which was to the experimental groups advantage. In comparison with each of the previously mentioned training's effect on social adjustment, it was determined that self-awareness skills' training was more effective than the other skills on increasing social adjustment. In addition, when comparing effective communication and stress management skills, the results obtained indicate that stress management training is more effective than communication management. This means that to increase social adjustment, stress management education is more effective than communication skills training.

There have been few previous studies that have investigated the effects of self-awareness on adaptation. However, the results show that self-awareness education is

an effective method of making improvements in adapting to difficult situations. For example Yadav and Iqbal (2009) in their study, attempted to increase adaptability in different groups of adolescents in India, through education of life skills. The results showed that skill training with an emphasis on self-awareness, while increased adaptability, self-esteem and empathy, was useful.

Visani et al (2010) in their study found that self-awareness education is effective and beneficial for improving adaptability. Even in groups with specific disorders, such as autism or pervasive developmental disorders, self-awareness training can improve a person's social adjustment and the skills of individual's entering into to groups (Solomon et al., 2004).

An individual's' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and identifying their realistic qualities and the short distance from the real and ideal self, are the foundations of successful adaptation, particularly academic and social adaptability⁴⁰ (Ferguso and Dubow, 2007). In particular, studies have shown that a proper understanding of self is the underlying key to understanding others and compliance with the requirements of environmental and societal demands (Hibell et al., 1997).

It gives a person the confidence to rely on his or her abilities to act competently in society. This method helps a person to adopt a more realistic approach, and based on what is, and to act accordingly. Concerning the effect of stress management training on academic adjustment, this is more effective compared with effective communication skills training. Since stress management skills include understanding life stressors and their effects on a person, identifying sources of stress, how it affects people and ways to deal with these effectively, it empowers a person to make the necessary changes to reduce pressure and stress, as a result it also increases the skills and abilities needed to improve their consistency performance.

In addition, the results demonstrated that self-awareness training was effective in improving academic adjustment. However, comparing the efficiency of the three skills on academic adjustment it was determined that the three skills equally influenced student's academic adjustment in the experimental groups. Related researches have also indicated the effectiveness of life skills training on improving adjustment and academic performance. In this regard, Hemmati and Shojaee's study (2001) showed that teaching life skills to students with conduct disorders decreased disruptive behaviors and increased adaptation to school and education. Furthermore, Sepah Mansour (2006) showed in another study that life skills training had a positive effect on achievement, self-respect and social adjustment, and increased overall improvements in academic performance and quality of life in this group.

Nevertheless the important point is that there was no important difference found in the effects of training on academic adjustment. The possible explanation for these findings is that successful adjustment to a university environment requires all three skills of self-awareness, stress management and effective communication with others, and no single skill was more important. In general, the results of this study showed that training in self-awareness, stress management, and effective communication skills, are able to affect and improve first-year students' social and academic adjustment.

5. Suggestions

Accordingly, it is proposed:

-Teaching life skills should be included as part of the extracurricular programs in cultural programs of university.

- Life skills training programs should be considered for primacy prevention in mental health; these could be provided and extended in students' assistance and counseling programs.

-Training of self-awareness and communication skills have an important role in enhancing social adjustment, therefore, the expansion and development of such skills seems to be necessary at university-level.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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